

# Difficult Conversations

As much as we try to avoid them, difficult conversations are part of life as a teacher.

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). **Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most.** New York: Viking Press. (Excerpted by Alexander Wang )

In studying hundreds of conversations of every kind it has been discovered clearly that there is an underlying structure to what's going on, and understanding this structure, in itself, is a powerful first step in improving how we deal with these conversations. It turns out that no matter what the subject, our thoughts and feelings fall into the same three categories or "conversations" And in each of these conversations we make predictable errors that distort our thoughts and feelings, and get us into trouble.

## The What Happened Conversation.

Most difficult conversations involve disagreement about what has happened or what should happen. We spend much of our time in difficult conversations as we struggle with our different stories about who's right, who meant what, and who's to blame.

On each of these three fronts—truth, intentions, and blame – we make a common but crippling assumption. The assumption is: I am right, you are wrong. The only thing about this assumption is that, you are not right. Difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values. They are not about what contract states, they are about what a contract means. They are not about what is true; they are about what is important.

Intention Invention. The error we make in the realm of intentions is simple but profound: we assume we know the intentions of others when we don't. Worse still, when we are unsure about someone's intentions, we too often decide they are bad. Assuming that your assumptions are correct about another's intentions is a fatal flaw in the realm of difficult conversations. You need to learn to work through what you know about the world, and try to see, or ask to understand how they came up with their side of things.

The third error we make in "What Happened?" conversations has to do with blame. Most difficult conversations focus significant attention on who's to blame for the mess we're in. Talking about fault is similar to talking about truth – it produces disagreement, denial, and little learning. It evokes fears of punishment and insists on an either/or answer. Nobody wants to be blamed especially unfairly, so our energy goes into defending ourselves. Talking about blame distracts us from exploring why things went wrong and how we might correct them going forward. Focusing instead on understanding the contribution system allows us to learn about the real causes of the problem and to work on correcting them.

## Arguing without Understanding Is Unpersuasive.

Arguing creates another problem in difficult conversations: it inhibits change. Telling someone to change makes it less rather than more likely that they will. This is because people almost never change without first feeling understood. To get anywhere in a disagreement, we need to understand the other person's story well enough to see how their conclusions make sense within it. And we need to help them understand the story in which our conclusions make sense. Understanding each other's stories from the inside won't necessarily "solve" the problem, but, it's an essential first step. In difficult conversations, too often we trade only conclusions back



and forth, without stepping down to where most of the real actions are: the information and interpretations that lead each of us to see the world as we do. Often we go through an entire conversation – or indeed an entire relationship – without ever realizing that each of us is paying attention to different things, that our views are based on different information. *We each know ourselves better than anyone else can.* In addition to choosing different information, we each have access to different information. For example, others have access to information about themselves that we don't. Their internal experience is far more complex than we imagine.

Even when we have the same information, we interpret it differently – we give it different meaning. I see the cup as half empty; you see it as a metaphor for the fragility of humankind. I'm thirsty; you're a poet. Two especially important factors in how we interpret what we see are our past experiences and the implicit rules we've learned about how things should and should not be done.

*The past gives meaning to the present.* Often, it is only in the context of someone's past experience that we can understand why what they are saying or doing makes any kind of sense. Every strong view you have is profoundly influenced by your past experiences. Where to holiday, whether to smack your kids, how much to budget for advertising – all are influenced by what you've observed in your own family and learned through your life. Often we aren't even aware of how these experiences affect our interpretations of the world. We simply believe that this is the way things are. Our past experiences often develop into "rules" by which we live our lives. Whether we are aware of them or not, we all follow such rules. They tell us how the world works, how people should act, or how things are supposed to be. And they have significant influence on the story we tell about what is happening between us in a difficult conversation.

There's nothing wrong with having these rules. In fact, we need them to order our lives. But when you find yourself in a conflict, it helps to make your rules explicit and to encourage the other person to do the same. This greatly reduces the chance that you will be caught in an accidental duel of conflicting rules.

### **Move from Certainty to Curiosity**

There's only one way to come to understand the other person's story, and that's by being curious. Instead of asking yourself, "How can they think that?!" Ask yourself "I wonder what information they have that I don't" Instead of asking, "How can they be that irrational?" ask "How might they see the world such that their view makes sense?" *Certainty locks us out of their story; curiosity lets us in.*

It can be awfully hard to stay curious about another person's story when you have your own story to tell especially if you're thinking that only one story can be right. We usually assume that we must either accept or reject the other person's story, and that if we accept theirs, we must abandon our own. The answer is that the question of who's story is correct makes no sense. Don't choose between the stories; embrace them both. Work to understand the other person's story and soon you will see that it isn't even about which story is "correct" because in difficult conversations, that has little to do with it.

### **Intentions**

There are two widespread mistakes that people make with intentions the first one is this. *Don't assume you know the others intentions*, listen to what they say about why they did something. One reason people assume another's intentions without having a conversation about



it is that we make an attribution about another person's intentions based on the impact of their actions on us. We feel hurt; therefore they intended to hurt us. We feel slighted; therefore they intended to slight us. Our thinking is so automatic that we aren't even aware that our conclusion is only an assumption. The second mistake is that we feel our good intentions sanitize bad impact. Once your good intentions are stated, that does not mean that your actions didn't cause hurt or mistrust between you and another. Even if you had the best intentions in the world, you have to recognize that your actions affected another in a way that made them feel uncomfortable, and the fact that you did not intend to doesn't make it better. *Apologize!*

## **The Feelings Conversation.**

Every difficult conversation also asks and answers questions about feelings. Are my feelings valid? Appropriate? Should I acknowledge or deny them, put them on the table or check them at the door? What do I do about the other person's feelings? What if they are angry or hurt? Difficult conversations do not just involve feelings, they are at their very core about feelings. Feelings are not some noisy byproduct of engaging in difficult talk, they are an integral part of conflict. Engaging in a difficult conversation without talking about feelings is like staging an opera without the music. You'll get the plot but miss the point. Understanding feelings, talking about feelings, managing feelings – these are among the greatest challenges of being human. There is nothing that will make dealing with feelings easy and risk free. However we can do a better job in the feelings Conversations than we are doing now.

The problem is that when feelings are at the heart of what's going on, they are the business at hand and ignoring them is nearly impossible. In many difficult conversations, it is really only at the level of feelings that the problem can be addressed. Framing the feelings out of the conversation is likely to result in outcomes that are unsatisfying for both people. The real problem is not dealt with, and further emotions have an uncanny knack of finding their way back into the conversation. So remember to be honest in every step of a conversation, find out before you begin, how you really feel as well as what made you feel that way. Are your feelings based on what you originally thought they were? Or are your feelings much more complicated than this one instance? When engaging in a conversation be mindful that feelings surround every topic that arises and that if the correct approach is not taken people may feel the need to be defensive.

## **The Identity Conversation.**

This is the conversation we each have with ourselves about what this situation means to us. We conduct an internal debate over whether this means we are competent or incompetent, a good person, or bad person, worthy of love or unlovable. What impact might it have on our self image and self esteem, our future and our well-being?

Become familiar with those identity issues that are important to you, so you can spot them during a conversation. Second, you need to learn to integrate new information into your identity in ways that are healthy. It is important to know what knocks you off balance in a conversation. What does this mean to you? How would you feel if what you fear were true? It may take some digging but is integral in becoming a productive problem solver.

Three things about yourself, you will make mistakes, learn to admit it. Your intentions are complex and you must learn to be honest about what your true intentions are. You have



contributed to the problem, it is crucial to understand your contribution to the problem and learning to assess it.

## **Create a Learning Conversation.**

Despite what we sometimes pretend, our initial purpose for having a difficult conversation is often to prove a point, to give them a piece of our mind, or to get them to do or be what we want. In other words, to deliver a message.

Once you understand the challenges inherent in the three conversations and the mistakes we make in each, you are likely to find that your purpose for having a particular conversation begins to shift. You come to appreciate the complexity of the perceptions and intentions involved, the reality of joint contribution to the problem the central role feelings have to play, and what issues mean to each person's self-esteem and identity. And you find that a message delivery stance no longer makes sense. In fact, you may find that you no longer have a message to deliver, but rather some information to share and some questions to ask.

Instead of wanting to persuade and get your way, you want to understand what has happened from the other person's point of view, explain your point of view, share and understand feelings, and work together to figure out a way to manage the problem going forward. In so doing, you make it more likely that the other person will be open to being persuaded, and that you will learn something that significantly changes the way you understand the problem. Changing our stance means inviting the other person into the conversation with us, to help us figure things out. If we're going to achieve our purposes, we need to have a learning conversation.

## **Don't Hit and Run.**

Often, when we have something important to say, we say it now because now is when it's causing us frustration. Most of us are thoughtful enough to avoid the most egregious errors of bad timing. However, there's another error around timing that we do make. It's the hit and run. An employee or student wanders in late, something you've been meaning to talk to them about, so you say, "Late again, eh?" and leave it at that. This kind of comment is intended to help. You hope they will take the message to heart. But while your comments may help you feel a bit better, they make the other person defensive and frustrated, which is unlikely to produce the kind of change you had in mind. A good rule to follow is: *If you're going to talk, talk. Really talk. And if you're really going to talk, you can't do it on the fly. You have to plan a time to talk. You have to be explicit about wanting ten minutes or an hour to discuss something that is important to you. You can't have a real conversation in thirty seconds, and anything less than a real conversation isn't going to help. If hit and run is all you can muster, it's better not to raise the issue at all.*

## **If you Raise It: Three purposes That Work**

*Learning their Story:* Exploring the other person's perspective takes us into each of the Three Conversations. What information do they see that we missed or don't have access to? What past experiences influenced them? What is their reasoning for why they did what they did?



*Expressing your views and Feelings:* Your goal should be to express your views and feelings to your own satisfaction. You hope that the other person will understand what you are saying, and saying, and perhaps be moved by it, but you can't count on that. What you can do is say, as well as you can, what is important for you to say about your views, intentions, contributions, feelings, and identity issues. You can share your story.

*Problem Solving Together:* Given what you and the other person have each learned, what would improve the situation going forward? Can you brainstorm creative ways to satisfy both of your needs? Where your needs conflict, can you use equitable standards to ensure a fair and workable way to resolve the conflict?

### **Step One: Begin from the Third Story**

In addition to your story and the other person's story, every difficult conversation includes an invisible Third Story. The Third Story is the one keen observer would tell, someone with no stake in your particular problem. For example, in the battle between bicycles and cars for the streets of the city, the Third Story would be the one told by city planners, who can understand each side's concerns and see why each group is frustrated with the other.

Think like a mediator, one of the most helpful tools a mediator has is the ability to identify this invisible third story. This means describing the problem between the parties in a way that rings true for both sides simultaneously. It's easy to describe the problem so that only one of the disputants would agree with it – in fact, that's what each of us does when we begin inside our own story. The trick is being able to get two people with different stories to sign on to the same description of what's going on. Try to learn how to remove the judgment from the description instead describe the problem, as a difference.

### **Step Two: Extend an Invitation**

#### **Describe your purposes**

If the other person is going to accept your invitation, they need to know what it is they are agreeing to do. Letting them know up front that your goal for the discussion is to understand their perspective make the conversation significantly less mysterious and threatening. Know that their perspective has a place in the conversation, and that this isn't a campaign to change them, makes it more likely that they will accept your invitation.

#### **Invite don't impose**

An invitation, of course, can be turned down. Neither person can force the other to engage in a conversation. If you conceptualize your task as "setting the description of the problem and purposes for the conversation", even a well-crafted opening may meet with some resistance, because this is now your version of the Third Story. So your offer should be open to modification by the other person.

Think of the goal rather as "offering and discussing a possible description and purpose" for your conversation. In other words, the task of describing the problem and setting purposes is itself a joint task.

#### **Make Them Your Partner in Figuring It Out**

Your invitation is more likely to be accepted if you offer the other person an appealing role in managing the problem. You need to side step the temptation to cast them as "the

problem” or in an unappealing light, since this will trigger their Identity Conversation, in turn making the person you are trying to reach feel defensive, and stop the conversation cold.

If accepting your invitation requires the other person to acknowledge that they are naïve, callous, manipulative, or in any other way unsavory or inadequate, they are substantially less likely to accept. If, on the other hand, you say, “Can you help me understand...?” you offer the role of adviser. “Let’s work on how we might...” invites a partnership. “I wonder whether it’s possible to...” throws out a challenge, one which offers the other person the potential role of hero.

### **Be Persistent**

Being persistent is not inconsistent with the advice to invite rather than impose. It may take a little work to help them understand what it is you are proposing.

### **A Map for Going Forward: Third Story, Their Story, Your Story.**

Beginning from the Third Story gets you safely to the base of the mountain. But then there’s the mountain itself to climb. Once a description of the problem is on the table, and your purposes are clear, then you will need to spend time exploring the Three conversations from each of your perspective. The other person will share their views and feelings, and you’ll step back into your story and share yours.

### **What to Talk about: The Three Conversations**

As you share your stories, each of the Three Conversations offers a useful path to explore. You can talk about the past experiences that have led each of you to see the current situation the way you do: “I think the reason I reacted so strongly is that the last time we didn’t receive payment from a vendor, the situation only went from bad to worse.”

You can ask about the other person’s intentions, and share the impact of their behavior on you: “I don’t know whether you realize this or not, but when you didn’t call, I was frantic with worry.” You can empathize with how they might be feeling: “If I were you, I’d be pretty frustrated at this point.” Or share what’s going on with your Identity Conversation: “I think the reason I find this so hard is that being fair is so important to me. It’s upsetting to think that the way I handled this situation might not have been fair to you.” Ultimately, what you choose to share will depend upon the context and the relationship and what feels appropriate and helpful.